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Nena T. Davis

"A Critique of Richard Rorty and Postmodernism"

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty has a postmodernist vision. He proposes a new language game, liberal ironism in which the contingency of language, the lack of an essential self, and the absence of an objective reality are recognized. Liberal ironists believe that "cruelty is the worst thing that we do" but recognize that this and all of their beliefs and desires are contingent. So even though their position against cruelty is "ungroundable," they still "hope that suffering will be diminished, that humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease" (Rorty, xv).

Given this desire to see the end of cruelty, liberal ironists should be concerned about helping those who suffer to end their pain. Those who suffer include the traditionally oppressed groups of society--persons of color, women, religious minorities, etc. Late in chapter four of *Contingency*, Rorty mentions how he believes the liberal ironist helps to end the suffering of the oppressed:

Pain is nonlinguistic: It is what we human beings have that ties us to the nonlanguage-using beasts. So victims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of a language. That is why there is no such things as the 'voice of the oppressed' or the 'language of the victims.' The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together. So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else. The liberal novelist, poet, or journalist is good at that (Rorty, 94).

This paper is a critique of this statement and the aspects of postmodernism which can allow such a statement to pass unnoticed. I will mainly use the insights of bell hooks to make my points. Thus, this paper can be seen as a critique of Richard Rorty by bell hooks, as I see her. I will argue that, among other mistakes, Rorty misunderstands the issues of language and voice of the oppressed in such a way that helps to perpetuate that oppression. Then I will explain how this is symptomatic of the postmodernist movement as a whole. Finally, I will look at how the liberal ironist can understand and help the oppressed in a more constructive way. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the fact that this paper is highly critical of Rorty's statement--critical to the point that I may seem to be unfair to Rorty the man. I am not going to argue that Rorty meant any harm by what he said, just that his understanding of the lives of the oppressed can be harmful and that this understanding is symptomatic of the potentially harmful aspects of the postmodernist movement. The most personal criticism of Rorty that I would make is that he fails to take a critical look at what he is saying--what it means, what it entails. Unlike most of his thoughts in *Contingency*, he fails to give, or even try to give, any intricate argument for his understanding of the role of the liberal ironist in ending oppression. Unlike almost everything else he holds in this book, this seems to be

taken for granted.

Pain, Language and Beasts

The first criticism I make about the statement has to do with its invalidity. Rorty writes, "Pain is nonlinguistic: It is what we human beings have that ties us to the nonlanguage-using beasts. So victims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of a language." But this is an invalid deduction. Just because pain is nonlinguistic doesn't mean that those who are suffering have little or no language.

Rorty's statement, while invalid on this point, illustrates a certain understanding of the oppressed that can be dangerous. To completely focus on suffering--this one aspect of being a people who, yes, suffer--is to ignore the strength of the oppressed and to see them as completely helpless and in need of *paternalistic* help from others. It is as if they are babies who cannot speak about their pain or like beasts which cannot express themselves except in a very primitive way. Moreover, the indirect analogy of the oppressed to beasts can lead one to conclude that the oppressed are primitive and not as sophisticated as those of dominate society. This analogy may be an indication that Rorty holds such a view, though not consciously or purposefully. Later it will become clear that this type of view is one that postmodernism can hold to a large extent, and this view is dangerous and misguided. For now, let the record show that the oppressed do more than simply suffer; they are more than simply oppressed. The oppressed are in pain, but they express this pain in many ways *linguistic* ways. The literature of the Black Renaissance provides one example of this.

If Rorty were saying that pain can make one speechless at times, I believe that most (including myself) would agree. bell hooks has written that there were times in which her suffering was so great that she "confronted [her own] silence, inarticulateness" (*Choosing the Margin [CTM]*, 146). But this statement is within an article about the language of the oppressed and about the oppressed being heard. She is talking about her suffering, as many can and **do** do. Clearly she has a language with which to speak.

Voice vs. Language

Rorty believes that "there is no such thing as the 'voice of the oppressed' or the 'language of the victims.' The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together." He seems to be confusing a voice in society with having a language, and this is where his misunderstanding is so significant to the perpetuation of suffering. As I have already argued, there is every reason to believe that the oppressed have a language or language games; these games are simply somewhat different from those of dominate society. In her article, "Choosing the Margin," hooks talks about the fact that she has at least two language games which she can play in order to tell her story of suffering. She can talk in academic language or with "black vernacular speech." She finally chose to create a language game which blended the two.

The reason that she had to come to this decision relates to her concerns about being heard, and being heard in such a way that the story she told would be true to herself and would be listened to by dominate society such that our society becomes more

informed about the suffering of underclass "black folk." It is difficult to discuss her life, partially because the suffering has created a broken voice, but also because "when you hear the broken voice you also hear the pain contained within that brokenness--a speech of suffering; often it's that sound nobody wants to hear" (CTM, 146). That "nobody" is dominant society. hooks holds that dominant society doesn't want to hear what she has to say or learn about the suffering of "black folk" or the oppressed in general. The voice of the oppressed is silenced, if not through obvious actions against their freedom to speech, simply by a refusal to listen.

When Rorty examined the situation, he did not hear the voice of the oppressed. He seems to have concluded that this meant that the oppressed have no language, when, in actuality, they simply are not listened to. In American society, one's voice can be silenced in the subtle way of refusing to listen. This refusal to listen is often validated by invalidating the words of the oppressed, i.e., you have a language, you just don't know what you're talking about. When those in dominant society speak for the oppressed and believe, as Rorty seems to, that it is the only way towards progress, how does this reflect upon the thoughts articulated by those of the oppressed groups about their own lives? Rorty's statement implies that those are not articulations; they are just beast-like moans of agony, because only those who *aren't* suffering have the capacity to speak on *their* suffering, or anything else.

The problem with Rorty's understanding of the situation is clear. It merely perpetuates the oppression of the oppressed. It rules out the possibility that the oppressed can speak about their oppression and have anything constructive to say: "Those liberal ironists of dominant society can learn what's going on and can speak about it." Those of dominant society are the authority of the pain that this society causes. This mentality keeps the oppressed in a subordinate role even though this is the very thing that the liberal ironist wants to bring an end to. Rorty's mentality provides an example of the dangerous perspective which is a part of postmodernism as a whole.

A Problem with Postmodernism

Postmodernism wishes to include 'the Other,' those who have been traditionally left out of the debate. It recognizes the importance of 'the Other' and difference, and wishes to make certain that 'the Other'--those of oppressed groups--are no longer ignored in the discourse. This goal of postmodernism has the potential to call attention to the suffering of the oppressed and to stress the importance of finding ways to alleviate it.

bell hooks' critique of postmodernism is that it fails to actualize this potential by refusing to look at the dominant views of 'the Other' critically. The typical postmodernist believes that if 'the Other' is talked about, then the problems of 'the Other' will dissolve. The inclusion of 'the Other' is only in theory, for they are not even welcomed in the discourse. 'The Other' is spoken *about*, not spoken *with*. The idea that 'the Other' is primitive and prelinguistic comes into play here; they certainly cannot be spoken with if they have lost the ability to engage in speak acts.

There is a related issue here. Predominantly, in **modernism**, the people who are talking are those of dominant society, so they are the ones who are talking about 'the Other.' Unfortunately, while doing this, though, the modernist often fails to look critically

at what it is about the dominant society, of which they are a part, which causes 'the Other' to exist and live a life of suffering as 'the Other' on the fringes of society. Rorty's statement implies that this is the only way that it can be, for the oppressed have no language; thus, there is no way that they could be a part of the discourse. In the postmodernist movement as a whole, hooks points out that often the work of scholars from oppressed groups is devalued for "being too 'angry'," even though the same insights of these scholars can be rearticulated by scholars of dominant society and receive acclaim (*Critical Interrogation [CI]*, 55).

In general, there is dismissal of the opinions of the oppressed, whether they are about the oppressed or the oppressor. But this only perpetuates the oppression, since it recognizes the language of the oppressed while silencing the voice of the oppressed. As bell hooks puts it:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now the center of my talk (CTM, 152; emphasis mine).

hooks' point is that assuming the oppressed need us (as members of dominant society) to speak of them is likely to help keep them oppressed. It's as if the privileged can become the experts on the suffering that they are not experiencing, while the oppressed cannot say anything because, supposedly, they cannot speak. But, again, it is not that they cannot speak: it's that they are not being heard. The liberal journalist and novelist would do better for the oppressed if they recognized that the oppressed do have a language, that *their* experience of *their* pain does make their voice important. Once they recognize this, hopefully their goal will be to **encourage society to listen to the oppressed**, rather than simply throwing their hands up in the air and thinking, "Oh, well, I guess I'll have to speak for Them."

Resolving the Problem with Rorty and Postmodernism

There will be times when the liberal ironist should speak for the oppressed, not because they have no language, but because they are not being heard. Linda Alcoff, in her article, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," gives four guidelines for speaking for the oppressed, which will help the liberal ironist in their quest to end cruelty without unwittingly supporting it. The first step is to be critical of the "impetus to speak.... If one's immediate impulse is to teach rather than listen to a less-privileged speaker, one should resist that impulse long enough to interrogate it" (Alcoff, 24). Rorty, as well as many others in the postmodernist movement, seems to have this impulse and fails to question it. Rorty all too quickly concludes that "the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else. The liberal novelist,

poet, or journalist is good at that."

According to Alcoff, one who will speak for others should consider their own world view and its bearing on what they are saying. Liberal ironists are likely to have the world view of dominant society. They should become aware of *exactly* how this world view shapes their thoughts and be ever critical of this. Alcoff argues that such a critique should be done as a part of the discourse with others, including 'the Other,' because they are likely to recognize "aspects of our location less highlighted in our own minds" (Alcoff, 25).

Alcoff also believes that it is also important for the liberal ironist and others to accept criticism of their views from other, especially 'the Other.' I would add that to dismiss the critique of 'the Other' as angry ravings--or simply wrong--without really trying to understand muffles the oppressed and denies them the voice that could begin to end the oppression.

Alcoff's final suggestion for those who will speak for others is to look at the implications of what they say. "One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker of her credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must look at where the speech goes and what it does there" (Alcoff, 26). Rorty and other liberal ironists will have to be more conscientious of what their general assessment of oppression entails and what their specific ideas about the needs of the oppressed do to that oppression.

I would add a few more rules of thumb which the liberal ironist should use when helping to alleviate the suffering of the oppressed but without perpetuating it. First, the liberal ironist should encourage society to listen to members of the oppressed themselves even though their words have the sounds of suffering "nobody wants to hear" (CTM, 146). The liberal ironist has substantive power and influence within dominant society. This power can be used either to make society take notice of the language of the oppressed or to invalidate 'the Other' and their words. Rap music, for example, should not be quickly criticized for, and dismissed as, being angry thought set to strange music which only perpetuates violence; this thought likely perpetuates a major reason for violence, the oppression of their voice. The liberal ironist can help to end suffering by giving the oppressed power through encouraging all to listening to what the oppressed have to say about their oppression. The liberal ironist can also help the oppressed by beginning a critical discourse on dominant society, by looking at what is wrong with our society that it finds it easy to oppress these people. This is one solution to the problem which bell hooks suggests. What fears are in the minds of dominant culture? What stereotypes of the oppressed make it easier to dismiss the ideas of the oppressed?

Only a persistent vigorous, and informed critique of whiteness could really determine what forces of denial, fear, and competition are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professed political commitment to eradicating racism [or oppression] and the participation in the construction of a discourse on race that perpetuates racial domination (CI, 54).

A final rule that I would add is this. The liberal ironist should avoid validating any particular view expressed by the members of oppressed groups. One should not go out there saying things like, "Person P really has some important things to say; listen to him." The ironist should not say, "We should listen to Person P because, according to me, she really knows what she's talking about." With such statements, one is invalidating the views of those in the oppressed group who disagree with Person P, and, thereby, is still making one's self *the* authority of what is the **right** perspective to take on what's happening with the oppressed and/or the oppressors.

It is not that the liberal ironist ought not to formulate beliefs about which views are better, after ample consideration of Persons X, Y, and Z views' as well. It is simply that given their current role of power and authority in society, they must be careful about what they say in order to avoid a continued exclusion of diverse voices. For now, the liberal ironist should encourage society to listen to everyone. Later, when most everyone is listened to, they can give their critique of the voices. To do otherwise at this point makes it very likely that the voices of the oppressed will not be heard. The dominant view about the oppressed will tend to make the liberal ironist endorse a speaker from a traditionally oppressed group who holds those same oppressive views, i.e., who is saying what dominant society *wants* to hear about its nature--for instance, that it's not really oppressive.

Rorty discusses the way in which the liberal ironist should approach the world, and his view is surprisingly similar to what Alcoff, hooks and I are suggesting. He wants the liberal ironist to be continuously critical of her present system of thought, her vocabulary. She should always be looking for ways to revise her current understanding of the world. One place that Rorty falls short in his vision is by not questioning his views on oppression nor looking for, or even expecting, new ways to see oppression which come from 'the Other.' Rorty's theory and postmodernism in general have potential. The postmodernist movement sees the problems and the traps of not including diverse ideas in the discourse. But both need to make sure they include ideas which are different from even their most basic views of the world. They must be certain that they are critical of even their most basic ideas. Amongst those basic ideas are the oppressive ideas about oppression. Listening to the oppressed not only will result in a critical reevaluation of their ideas about oppression, but can begin the elimination of oppression itself.

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